

## THE EIGHT GREAT LEARNING NEEDS OF THE VIRTUAL WORKFORCE



*With just over one billion mobile workers at present and 1.3 billion (one-third of the global workforce) expected by 2015 coupled with the constant need to do more with less across the 24-hour clock, there is much to be learned in order to be effective in this new world. Whether working in a company facility and interacting with those in other physical locations or working as an occasional, part-time or full-time telecommuter - practitioners, managers, and senior leaders must learn new ways to operate.*

Consider the definition of "virtual" as separated by physical distance, united by a common goal, and enabled by technology. Every single piece of the organization is affected when a workforce has a virtual component. The list could easily include recruiting, learning and development, performance management, reward and recognition, business processes, product and service development processes, communication, legal, information technology, strategy and more.

Few changes have had such a pervasive and deep effect on how we run our businesses. Learning and development organizations have a significant role in ensuring that the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to be successful in this virtual evolution are known and relevant learning opportunities made available to learners. Let's look at the eight great learning needs (not in any order of priority) of the virtual workforce, and some suggested learning solutions to address these needs.

### 1. VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

**Why:** The goal of communication is to achieve a shared meaning among communicators. When face to face, a high percentage of meaning is derived from non-verbal cues including the surrounding physical context and feedback loops. When virtual, and especially asynchronous, these physical cues are missing. 94% of virtual worker respondents in a 2010 cultural firm survey of 30,000 internationally, stated that their top challenge was an inability to read verbal cues. As such, different techniques and approaches that blow-up the rules we all learned for communicating in the physical world, are required to ensure a shared meaning among communicators in a virtual setting. Trying to force-fit the ways of the physical world into the virtual world will fail.

**Learning Solutions:** Virtual training that focuses on how to increase the amount of human senses in each communication opportunity training; "Keep us on the right track" coaches; periodic feedback.

### 2. VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

**Why:** The goal of collaboration is for the right group of people to achieve a shared goal in the required timeframe and at the

required cost, better than had they done it without each other. A shared meaning of the collaboration goal, behaviors, and process is critical. When face to face, many times collaboration includes the spontaneous assembling of people in the local vicinity. When virtual, the "right" people are often left out due to the perceived burden of including virtual workers. Further compounding the issue, geographically dispersed workers typically have varied understandings of collaboration goals, behaviors, and processes leading to ineffective collaboration.

**Learning Solutions:** Virtual training that focuses on: methods for inclusion despite time zones; ways to garner everyone's input despite culture, and when to utilize asynchronous as well as synchronous tools training; effectiveness measures; "Keep us on the right track" coaches; periodic sharing of what's working and what's not.

### 3. VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION & COLLABORATION TOOLS

**Why:** There is usually one of two scenarios at play here. One, some organizations have a minimal set of tools to use in virtually communicating. Typically these are: email and sometimes a virtual platform such as Live Meeting or WebEx. Many times, only the very basic capability of these tools are being used, ignoring the robust features which can, without much training, take collaboration to a very effective level. The second typical scenario is when an organization has a plethora of virtual communication and collaboration tools. Many times, no one knows them all and everyone is using different ones, creating a complex infrastructure and confused participants. A common set of tools needs to be identified and workers trained on how to robustly use them.

**Learning Solutions:** Virtual training on what tools will be used, when they should be used, and how to use them.

### 4. VIRTUAL TEAMING

**Why:** Teams require a common vision and understanding, a collaborative process, mutual accountability, efficient work processes, complementary skill sets, and so forth. To sum it up...a lot of "common shared" stuff needs to be happening in order for a team to be effective. The techniques to

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unite a group of people separated by physical distance and sometimes cultural distance do not just happen serendipitously or in a co-located environment. For example, it is more challenging to express opinions when on virtual teams than on conventional teams.

**Learning Solutions:** Classroom training when a major shift in behavior is required. Virtual training for reinforcement or skill honing. Periodic sharing of what's working and what's not. Virtual training on processes and workflows to ensure a common understanding and execution.

#### 5. CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

**Why:** Every country's culture communicates differently. Without a basic understanding of this when teams are working with global partners, shared meaning is difficult to achieve. Cultural skills are different than virtual skills. Virtual skills should be learned first then coupled with cultural awareness as needed. Lack of cultural awareness exacerbates virtual challenges.

**Learning Solutions:** Virtual training and reference websites for the basics. If teams are working closely together, bringing some members, who will act as coaches or advocates, into a physical training session can be helpful.

#### 6. MANAGING A VIRTUAL WORKFORCE

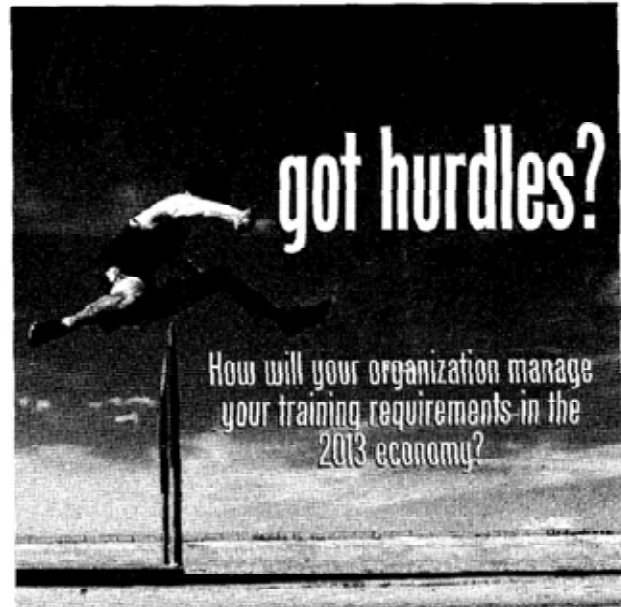
**Why:** Everything a manager does is affected when virtual workers are part of their organization: recruiting, onboarding, aligning the team, setting processes, assigning work, monitoring work, providing feedback, coaching, rewarding and recognizing – to name more than a few. Managers must learn how to "see" in a new way when their eyes are no longer the primary tool. Setting expectations is critical and far beyond what is required in the physical workplace where physical cues and context "fill in the gaps," and understanding how to manage a "blended" organization of co-located and virtual workers may not be intuitive.

**Learning Solutions:** Classroom training when a major shift in behavior is required. Virtual training for reinforcement or skill honing. Periodic sharing of what's working and what's not. There are two approaches: Stand-alone sessions on the virtual workforce or integrating the virtual management techniques into existing management or leadership training.

#### 7. LEADING A VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

**Why:** Senior leaders must set a business and talent strategy that leverages the virtual workplace, enable it with the appropriate technology and guidelines, and instill the trusting and collaborative behaviors required. Many senior leaders, especially those of the WWII or baby boomer generation, find it difficult to trust workers they cannot see on a regular basis.

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**Learning Solutions:** Articles and studies that present a balanced view of the challenges and benefits of a virtual workforce. Meetings with leaders from other companies or industry experts to discuss the key issues, concerns, and best practices can also be helpful.

## 8. VIRTUAL TRAINING SKILLS FOR WORKERS

**Why:** It is a common and necessary part of everyone's job (not just professional instructional designers and trainers) to design and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and the development of skills across the dispersed workforce. Unfortunately, uninformed workers and managers believe that listening is learning, i.e., bulleted PowerPoint slides with a few animations and visuals delivered on a virtual platform is a cost and learning effective way to "train."

**Learning Solution:** Do-it-yourself tools, templates, and basic accelerated training must be provided to move these training efforts from ineffective to "effective enough" admonishing that they will never be as good as when professional learning and development personnel are involved.

### WHEN THESE EIGHT GREAT LEARNING NEEDS ARE IGNORED

Productivity will slow, errors will occur more often, trust among team members will wane, and costs will rise. Visible signs include lengthy emails chains, excessive CCing, continuous meetings, an increasing need for more structure or bureaucracy, excessive need for consensus, decision-making avoidance, poor decision making, and attrition. One of the biggest mistakes is trying to virtually mimic the way things are done in the physical setting. New ways of managing, leading, communicating, and collaborating are needed. These knowledge, skills, and behaviors are not generally intuitive for those accustomed to communicating in a physical setting, and as such, need to be learned.

### ACTIONS FOR LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

What might you or your learning and development organization do to ensure your company's or your clients' businesses stay on course as they navigate this virtual evolution? Is the organization using optimal virtual communication and collaboration tools and methods to ensure results, productivity and quality? Are managers trained in managing those they do not see on a regular basis? Do senior leaders understand what is needed to enable and support a virtual workforce? Is the learning organization providing training and tools that enable the all aspects of the virtual organization? And one final question, if not now, when?

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